MANAGING DIFFERENCES IN THE WORKPLACE

By Jo Smith CMC

"I do not like that man. I must get to know him better." —Abraham Lincoln

All employees are different. They may have different races, ethnicities, and/or genders. And certainly they will have different personalities, experiences, talents, strengths, and challenges. Do you tolerate these differences, perhaps try to diminish them to make everyone the same, to make management easier? Or do you welcome and embrace these differences?

Inclusive leadership

What is inclusive leadership? Inclusive leaders value team members, invite diverse perspectives, and create an atmosphere where people feel their opinions and contributions matter. Inclusive leaders are authentic; they exhibit self-assurance and emotional resilience. They're inquisitive and flexible in their management style.

Why does inclusive leadership matter? Inclusive leaders ensure all employees have the opportunity to reach their potential. They optimize diversity for innovation and growth. Their teams and organizations benefit, because they increase productivity, profitability, engagement, and retention.

Why might employees not feel included? Employees don't feel included if they think they can't be their authentic selves at work. This has become more important in recent years, especially among the younger generation of workers. Employees don't feel included if their talents aren't welcomed or if their contributions aren't acknowledged and appreciated. They don't feel included if they are left out of discussions and decisions.

Ways you can use inclusive leadership to manage differences

- **Build trust.** Begin with your own mindset, by assuming positive intent. People might not agree with you about the right course of action, but in the vast majority of cases, their intentions are positive. Recognizing and acknowledging this will help them get on board, even when their opinions differ from yours. A foundation of trust, according to Patrick Lencioni in his book "The Advantage," allows people to disagree respectfully, reach agreement, then hold each other accountable to their agreements. This process allows teams to achieve results together.

- **Hold open discussions.** Welcome participation and invite different ideas and viewpoints. Ask questions, listen to responses, and probe to learn more. Insist everyone be respectful. Respectful disagreement is not only possible but often healthy and can help foster growth and innovation. In open discussion, you can also identify commonalities and shared values, which will help your team bond and work together collaboratively.

- **Provide team-building activities and training.** The first and most obvious reason for training is to build the talent and bench strength of your team. Done well, the shared experience of group training also provides your team with more opportunities to bond and work together effectively.

- **Optimize talent.** Employees are most likely to be happy, engaged, and productive when they're using their highest talents. It is in your interest to help them find the work they do best. To do that, observe their work. Use your
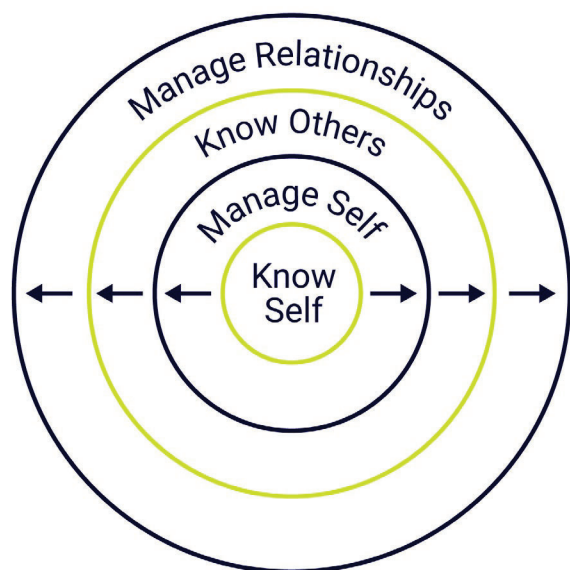
experience to note what they do well and anticipate what more they might learn to do well. Meet with them one on one and ask them what they want. Instead of making assumptions, ask, "What do you especially like to do? What more would you like to learn? What kinds of projects do you want to work on?" Then help them do the work they do best and enjoy most, while meeting the needs of your team and organization.

- **Recognize and reward talent.** These are critical tools for engaging your employees individually and collectively. In a busy world, it's easy to forget to celebrate successes—your own and others'—but your team will benefit greatly from recognition. Financial rewards and extra time off are appreciated, when possible, but don't forget the simple "thank-yous." Be specific, from the simple to the significant: "Thank you for the extra time you put into this project!" "Thank you for improving our service guidelines!" Compliment your employees, again being specific: "Your communication skills are excellent!" They will not only feel appreciated but know what you appreciate and why, which will lead to more of the behavior you desire.

- **Use the four components of emotional intelligence:** 1) know yourself and your emotions, 2) manage your emotions and emotional responses, 3) understand and empathize with others, and 4) manage your relationships. These are skills everyone can use and improve throughout their lives to achieve more professional success and personal happiness.

Understanding Personalities

What are the components of different personalities? PREP Personal Strengths identifies four personality trait continuums: 1) Controlling – Supportive, 2) Outgoing – Introspective, 3) Relaxed – Urgent, and 4) Exacting – Generalizing. Too often people think, consciously or otherwise, "My way is the right way, therefore yours is wrong." If you're going to manage

differences successfully, it's critical for you to recognize that every one of these traits is positive! And each has its challenges. For example, controlling people commonly exude confidence and people tend to follow their leadership, but sometimes they become authoritative, especially under stress. Outgoing people are great at building relationships but are sometimes distracted from the purpose of their work. Relaxed people study change options carefully but sometimes spend too much time analyzing, thus missing opportunities. Some people love detail, while others see the big picture and how the parts fit together. People with traits on the opposite ends of the same continuum can annoy each other. Or they can complement each other, utilizing each other's strengths to achieve more and better results. Managers can take the lead and help their teams embrace each other's differences.

Communication styles differ. The same PREP system identifies communication styles on a continuum between direct and personal. The direct communicator likes to go straight to the facts, the bottom line. Their messages are heard because they deliver them clearly. Their challenge is that they are sometimes perceived as harsh; they step on toes when that's not their intention. By contrast, the personal communicator tends to be warm and friendly. They build relationships well, but sometimes they ramble. If they need to deliver a difficult message, they procrastinate, then they beat around the bush. As a result, their messages sometimes aren't heard, even when they think they are. Are both of these communications styles valuable? Yes! Use them and manage them. Be aware of who you are addressing. If you're talking with someone you think is direct, give them the facts first. If you're communicating with someone you think is more personal, chat a little, explain your process, then deliver your conclusions. And if you're talking with a group, include a little casual conversation and the facts. In that way, you're more likely to connect with everyone.

Problem-solving styles differ on a continuum between systematic and innovative. The systematic person tends to solve problems step by step. The innovative person might face the same problem, but suddenly see a solution while going for a run. Innovative people sometimes think systematic problem-solvers never reach outside-the-box solutions, whereas systematic people tend to think innovative problem-solvers are in la-la land. Neither is true. These differing problem-solvers can work together to reach better solutions if they recognize the value each style provides.

These tools can help you become a more inclusive and effective leader. Managing your team with greater awareness and appreciation of their differences will help you build stronger relationships and achieve better results, including increased engagement, productivity, retention, and profitability. NWPPA

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